

Sunday 22 September 2024
The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom of Solomon 1:16 - 2:1, 12-22

NT: James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

Gp: Mark 9:30-37

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks in the passage today from his letter. If we were trying to identify those with wisdom and understanding from us here today, who would we go for? What factors would influence our decision? Would we look for age, learning and intelligence? Would we look for authority, leadership, qualifications, experience, length of time as a Christian or grey hair? We have plenty of those factors just within the clergy! Who do we consider as wise?

James tells us some of the characteristics of the wisdom that comes from God – it is pure, peace-loving, gentle, flexible, full of mercy, good things come from it, it doesn't take sides, and it hangs together: it has integrity. This is the level of wisdom that God's people are to exercise in the church, with one another, and most importantly, in the world. However, James is a realist, and he knows this is a big ask. So, he helpfully points to things that get in the way of wisdom. Where there is envy and selfish ambition, disorder and evil will follow. Conflicts and disputes come from deep longings within us to have things- power, status, wealth, property and possessions. We desire things for ourselves, and our families and it puts us into conflict with one another, sometimes very subtly.

We see an example of this in today's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples have come down from the mountain after the Transfiguration where the glory of God has been revealed in Jesus. As they walk along, Jesus teaches them what it means for him to be the Son of Man, the Messiah. He speaks of betrayal, of being killed and then rising again. The disciples don't really get this and they don't want to ask for clarification, so they go off into their own world with only part of the information. The disciples have heard about the Son of Man, and they've perhaps interpreted this to mean that he's going to take power and overthrow the Romans and become King. The disciples argue about their positions in this new kingdom. Who will be the boss, who will be the treasurer, who will be the spokesperson for the new King? Who will be the greatest? Conflict, argument and dispute- envy and selfish ambition, all of these desires are within the disciples, leaving no room for the wisdom of Jesus.

Their argument happened on a public road, out in the open. Jesus' question, however, is asked in the privacy and interior space of a house. This is about more than a change in physical location. Jesus is moving the conversation inward. He's not gathering information for himself but inviting the disciples' self-reflection on what it means to be great. He's presenting the disciples with an image and the reality of their better selves, and he's doing so for us too.

Jesus is not saying that we should not or cannot be great. He never says that. Rather, he is asking us to reframe our understanding of greatness. Jesus answers that question by taking a little child in his arms and saying to the disciples, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus does not say that greatness is in being a child and he doesn't say that greatness is in being childlike. Greatness is in welcoming the child.

Now that doesn't sound too difficult or challenging. Who wouldn't welcome a little child? But Jesus isn't talking about the child. He's talking about what the child represents. The child is a symbol for something else. The child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency. The child in Jesus' day had no rights, no status, no economic value. The child was a consumer and not a producer. Greatness, Jesus says, is in welcoming and receiving into our arms one like this, regardless of their age.

What does it mean and look like for you and me to be great in today's world? That's the question.

Greatness is found not in what we have accomplished and gained for ourselves but in what we have done and given to "the least of these" (Mt. 25:40), the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned; the symbolic children in each of our lives. Think about a family member or a care assistant who bathes, changes, and cares for the elderly, the sick, the dying; she or he is a great one.

Greatness never puts itself in a position of superiority over another. It is not about me; my nation, my people, my religion, my politics, my bank account, my house, my job, my achievements, my reputation or my status. Our greatness is revealed in our service and care of others regardless of their ability or willingness to pay, repay, or return the favour.

When Jesus talked about loving others even when they don't love you (Lk. 6:32), doing good to those who do not do good to you (Lk. 6:33), lending without expectation of repayment (Lk. 6:34), and inviting to supper those who cannot invite you back (Lk. 14:12), he was describing greatness.

Greatness comes to us when we share with others who have nothing to share with us. Think of the young boy who shared his five loaves and two fish with 5000 people who contributed nothing but their hunger (Jn. 6:9). The people who work in foodbanks and make sure people are fed, they are great.

Greatness comes when we forgive one who has neither asked for our forgiveness nor changed their behaviour. Those who refuse to carry bitterness or envy toward one another are great. When we respond to the needs of others, when we refuse thoughts and actions of hatred or prejudice then greatness comes. When we overcome fear, tear down walls, and make room for one who is different, vulnerable, in need, then we are great.

Greatness is not something to be achieved or earned. It is a quality that arises within us when our lives are in balance, and we step into our better selves. That's the life Jesus offers us. That's the life I want to live. I want to be great, don't you? This kind of greatness happens in the simple, ordinary, and mundane. It often goes unnoticed and unnamed but it's there. Greatness is always a choice set before us.

In terms of wisdom, as Christians filled with the Holy Spirit, wisdom should influence all of our lives. We are to evaluate every system, every power and every choice based on the outcome for the most vulnerable in our communities. This affects our politics, lifestyles, jobs, what we eat, what we wear, how we travel and what we do with our money etc

It's both challenging and threatening, to ourselves and to our social norms. Such sacrificial living, such wisdom, cost Jesus his life. Made in God's image and baptised into the body of Christ, we are called to follow in his footsteps and learn from him. These are the secret purposes of God, the wisdom and understanding that God wants us to have. The least is the greatest in the kingdom of God, the first must be last and last and servant of all.

Mthr Jennifer Brady